



# New Distribution Record of the Chin Hills Keelback, *Hebius venningi* (Wall 1910) (Natricidae), from Manipur, Northeast India

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Manipur is a small (22,327 km<sup>2</sup>) mountainous state in northeastern India. Approximately 92% of the total area is comprised of hills and, with 74.34% forest cover, it is India’s fourth most forested state (Arunkumar 1999; Forest Survey of India 2021). Due to its peripheral location, small size, lack of paved roads in much of the hill country, and sensitive political situation, Manipur’s reptilian assemblage has been poorly documented. The Zoological Survey of India’s 2005 State Fauna Series reported that the National Zoological Collection at the Eastern Regional Station housed nine species of reptiles from the state, although it acknowledged a wealth of wildlife in Manipur that was not reflected in this collection (Mathew 2005). Arunkumar (1999) listed eight species of “endangered” reptiles, whereas Acharji and Kripalani (1951) had recorded 13 species of reptiles collected during a 1945 survey. Recently, additional reptilian species have been confirmed from the state, such as *Amyda ornate jongli* (Hmar et al. 2022), *Boiga quincunciata* (Sinate et al. 2022), *Bungarus niger* (Sinate et al. 2021), *Calotes geissleri*

(Decemson et al. 2021), *C. irawadi* (Decemson et al. 2023), *Cyrtodactylus namtiram* (Mahony and Kamei 2022), and *Lycodon jara* (Elangbam et al. 2022). I was unable to locate any comprehensive, referenced checklist of reptilian species in Manipur.

*Hebius venningi* (Wall 1910) is a natricid snake informally grouped with other dark-bellied members of the genus *Hebius*, which were recently reviewed and redefined by David et al. (2021). In that study, the authors restricted known records of *H. venningi* to western Myanmar and the northeastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Mizoram. Herein I report the first record of *H. venningi* from Manipur, thus filling in a distributional gap between Nagaland and Mizoram.

At 1100 h on 24 April 2023, while hiking outside of Phuba Thapham village in Senapati District, Manipur, India (25.419600 N, 94.242986 E; elev. 1,572 m asl), I encountered an adult *H. venningi* under a large rock on the edge of a terraced rice paddy (Fig. 1). The paddy bordered a for-



**Figure 1.** A Chin Hills Keelback (*Hebius venningi*) encountered near Phuba Thapham village, Senapati District, Manipur, India. Photograph by Jon Hakim.

ested mountain stream surrounded by steep canyon walls. The snake was photographed without handling and allowed to escape. Photographic vouchers were deposited in the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum in Singapore [ZRC(IMG) 2.609a–c]. The identity of the species was confirmed by Olivier S.G. Pauwels.

The snake was distinguished from *H. nigriventer* (Wall 1925) by having an olive-tan rather than very dark dorsum; a relatively distinct rather than a subdued checkered pattern; pale yellowish-tan rather than bright orange, rusty red, or reddish brown dorsolateral blotches; and yellowish rather than bright orange or rusty-red streaks on the sides of the neck (David et al. 2021). It was distinguished from the Taron Keelback, *H. taronensis* (Smith 1940), by having an olive-tan rather than a brown to blackish-brown dorsum; a checkered rather than a complex speckled or mottled pattern forming a reticulum; and pale yellowish-tan rather than bright orange or yellowish-red dorsolateral blotches (David et al. 2021).

This new site record, the first from Manipur (David et al. 2021; Uetz et al. 2023; Jayaditya Purkayastha, pers. comm.), is approximately 34 km southeast of the nearest reported locality at Khonoma, Nagaland (David et al. 2021) and fills in the distributional gap with the westernmost distribution at Hmuifang Community Reserved Forest, Mizoram (Lalbiakzuala and Lalremsanga 2019).

At present, the species is listed as Least Concern (LC) under the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2020 (Lau 2020). Other reptiles observed in the region included *Rhabdophis himalayanus*, *Dopasia gracilis*, and *Eutropis multifasciata*. Systematic surveys in Manipur would likely result in additional state records, especially in these northern hills adjacent to the border with Nagaland.

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